

Thinking With The Church: Essays in Historical Theology

B.A. Gerrish

Reviewed by Jim West

Part Two – Faith and Morals – is comprised of three chapters, none of which, I confess right up front, were of any interest to me. Why? Because they are in point of fact simply three chapters examining ‘Philosophy of Religion’ or perhaps even ‘Atheist Philosophy and Religion’. That said, I’m sure these chapters (discussing Fichte, Forberg, and Feuerbach) will be of great interest to others. I just found them tedious and – well – boring. Though there was one tidbit that surely contains much truth: ‘... students often admire most what they can’t understand and whatever sounds new’ (p. 67). That little observation explains why so many students are so taken of new, and vapid, ideas and why they abandon what they have learned to that point. And it also explains the attraction of fad theologies.

Part Three – The Calvinist Tradition – on the other hand, was absolutely engaging and absorbing. Calvin’s place in Christian theology; Charles Hodge; and finally Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Hodge all together come under Gerrish’s microscope. Schleiermacher comes off better than he should (but I suppose that’s just my own Brunnerian contempt coming through) and Hodge comes off pretty well too. Calvin, naturally, comes off best of all.

Gerrish’s exposition of the theology of Hodge in the context of the latter’s travels across Europe is very interesting, at least to me. Whenever scholars can be placed in some sort of context what they thought and taught becomes so much more intelligible. The ability to contextualize theologians was Karl Barth’s greatest gift, and greatest contribution to the study of historical theology. Gerrish is of Barth’s tribe in that respect. He has grand powers of description and he uses sentences like a sniper uses a rifle.

To this point, Part Three shines most brightly. We will have to wait, however, to see how Gerrish handles the doctrine of the Atonement in Part Four before a final verdict can be uttered. To that we turn in the next installment.